

BONNIE GUITAR'S `LAST HURRAH - ONCE OH-SO-NEAR THE TOP, THIS COUNTRY SINGER IS TRYING TO GRAB JUST A BIT OF THE SPOTLIGHT AGAIN

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``So here it is, my last hurrah.

I'm here to tell the world that I'm

alive and well.

Yes, I'm still here.

And if I'm looking square of jaw,

it's all because I've made the

grade,

And with the climb, I've kicked my

fears."

- Bonnie Guitar, 1985

SOAP LAKE, Grant County _ Valentine's Eve brings icy, 10-degree cold and snow to this sleepy one-time resort town. The snow swirls and drifts, eerily illuminated by neon beer signs in the tavern windows.

Main Street _ two short blocks of aging storefronts housing one small grocery, two secondhand stores, a cafe and five taverns _ is deathly still except for a few faint strains of twangy guitar wafting with the snowflakes. You follow the music past the parked pickup trucks, down a short flight of stairs to the underground door of the Soap Lake Businessman's Club.

Inside are about 50 men and women scattered around a warm, smoky, low-ceilinged room. Men in Levis and Stetsons or baseball caps are perched on log-cutout stools at the epoxied cedar bar. Two couples shuffle around the oak dance floor, hips swaying gently, hats tipped rakishly back.

Few eyes are turned to the singer, who is flanked by a bass player and drummer at one end of the room. She is short, barely 5 feet 3 inches tall, chunky, with a warm, expressive face and a full head of tight, brown curls. As she squints into the lights, her high cheekbones give her an Eskimolike appearance.

She wears black, skintight pants, black patent-leather boots, and a splendid shirt sparkling with colored sequins ("`Nashville?" ``No, Nordstrom's," she says later.)

Her eyes are half closed, fingers float across steel strings like a classical harpist's, up and down the neck of her throaty, sunburst Les Paul electric. Her mouth is barely an inch from the microphone, her voice a tender but mature blend of Patti Page and Kate Smith:

``Dark Moon

Way up high, up in the sky

Tell me why, oh tell me why

You lost your splendor.

Dark moon

What is the cause your light with-

draws?

Is it because, is it because

I've lost my love?"

If you're over 35, the tune rings familiar. In 1957, it catapulted onto the AM airwaves and up to No. 6 on the Billboard pop chart, competing head-on with Elvis Presley and ``All Shook Up."

Then Bonnie Guitar was a spunky, popular country-western singer and guitarist, Seattle's homegrown country queen, flirting with the national spotlight.

After ``Dark Moon," there was ``Mr. Fire Eyes," then ``I Believe in Love" and ``I'm Living in Two Worlds." There were dozens of singles and albums. She was the host of her own local radio program.

The offers poured in from record companies, and then from Hollywood. .

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``I remember her as a wonderful singer," country crooner Eddy Arnold recalls of their touring together when she performed backup for him in the 1950s and 1960s. ``But even more I remember her as a musician and an entertainer. She could walk out on a stage, just her and that guitar, and keep an audience."

Today Bonnie Guitar is 63, living alone in a 30-by-20-foot cabin, her glittering stage wardrobe folded and stacked in wooden orange crates. The cabin is surrounded by the stark, frigid winter of Soap Lake, where she croons her cowboy songs and love ballads and tickles her guitar strings at a little-known, small-town club.

Hers is a story of life near the top, at the brink of fame. She is the girl who almost hit the top of the record charts, who almost tried out to play Gene Autry's Annie Oakley, who almost tried out for the cast of ``Gunsmoke" _ but who never quite did any of them.

But Bonnie Guitar is pleased to report she is ``alive and well," pedaling several miles a day on an exercise cycle at the local health club. The road from Hollywood and Nashville to Soap Lake is one not of failure, but of choices. Hers is a story of roots, of coming home, of tender mercies.

And she's not finished, yet. There's a new album. Bonnie Guitar's Last Hurrah has just begun.

The pace quickens as Bonnie and her three-piece band skip into a lively rendition of ``Elijah," with Bonnie tapping out a tom-tom rhythm up and down the neck of her guitar. From there, she glides into a jazzy ``New York, New York," then a Beatles number with a heavy-metal guitar break, then a medley of old favorites, ``Springtime in the Rockies" and ``You Are My Sunshine."

Her repertoire seems endless, ranging from Grand Ole Opry to Broadway to MTV.

The locals surge to the dance floor, whooping and cheering for their local celebrity. Bonnie soaks it up.

``This place, these people helped me through the hardest times in my life," Bonnie says during a break. ``They're my family."

Her face, fleshy yet weathered after nearly half a century under the lights, exudes life and her brown eyes sparkle almost childlike when she talks about the things she loves _ her friends, her family and her music.

She is a native daughter, born Bonnie Buckingham in Auburn. Her father supported his family with farming and odd jobs, played the violin and taught his daughter to love music, be it Mozart or Jimmie Rodgers.

``Long as I can remember, I wanted to be a singer," she recalls. ``I would climb the trees and sing and pretend I was broadcasting."

She spurned piano and violin, wanted to play the clarinet, but the high-school orchestra didn't have one. ``So eventually I picked up a little flat-top Gibson that my brothers had abandoned."

That little Gibson became a compulsion, which became a career and, ultimately, a name.

``The guitar was considered to be a hillbilly instrument," she says. ``But my mother encouraged me anyway. She started getting me into the amateur shows in Seattle. I won a few prizes, and I learned a lot about performing.

``My first amateur show I sang an old cowboy song with about 40 verses. I sang every one of them. I won first prize, which was a dollar, but I often wonder if they just wanted to get rid of me."

By age 21, she was touring with a western band, singing and playing cowboy ballads such as ``Little Joe, The Wrangler" and ``Letter Edged in Black."

``I guess they're still my favorites," she says. ``Some are simple story songs, but others are very complex, with three separate parts and chords for every note. I'd like to record an album of cowboy songs, just to help preserve them."

By her mid-20s, she was working as a studio musician _ a rarity for a woman in the record business _ working with the likes of Eddy Arnold, Glen Campbell, Kris Kristofferson and Willie Nelson. ``Willie had a pompadour haircut and a suit and he looked like a banker," she says. ``He didn't make it until he went outlaw, you know."

In 1956 she cut her own record, and an executive asked, ``What are we going to call you?"

``Well, I knew my married name, which was Tutmarc (her first marriage, which ended in divorce), wouldn't do. And he didn't like my maiden name. So somebody suggested `Bonnie Guitar,' and I said, `Fine.' And it stuck."

The late '50s and early '60s were peak years, during which she produced singles such as ``Dark Moon" and ``Mr. Fire Eyes," and albums such as ``Whispering Hope" (1959), ``Moonlight," (1960) and others.

Meanwhile, she produced and played guitar for the early hits of Seattle's Fleetwoods, who eventually recorded the classic ``Mr. Blue."

There were calls from Hollywood: Would she try out for the Annie Oakley part? For a singing part in the MGM ``Road . . ." series?

``It never culminated. My first husband didn't want me to have anything to do with the Hollywood scene. And I wasn't ready to make the move at the time."

So Bonnie Guitar's success remained largely regional. Later, in the 1960s, she moved briefly to Los Angeles to work in record production. But her friends say she never really left the Northwest, where she grew attached to her secluded, idyllic, 80-acre farm near Orting, at the foot of Mount Rainier. There she rode horses, raised her daughter, Paula, and performed now and then at The Wharf, the Trojan Horse and other Seattle clubs.

She is an intense artist, a perfectionist, her friends say. She demanded the most of herself, but seemed to hesitate at the prospect of hitting the top. She felt uncomfortable in Nashville; ``Nashville belongs to the South," she says. ``I never felt accepted there as a westerner.

``I've had some wonderful things offered to me, and I turned them down. Who knows why? Maybe I was afraid of failure. But how could I have any regrets?"

Friends say she balked at the prospect of giving up her family and farm. ``I think she had a fear of the top," says Larry Ray, who is producing her album. ``And who can blame her; the people who have made it to the top in this business have had to give up almost everything along the way."

Instead, she fell in love with a local heavy-equipment operator named Mario DePiano. In the mid-1960s, they were married and moved to the farm. The second marriage lasted.

``Mario took care of the farm, while Mom went on the road," recalls Paula Johnson, Bonnie's 34-year-old daughter, who lives with her own family on the Orting farm. ``That's the way she wanted it, and it worked real good that way. He was very special, a real soul mate.

They took care of each other."

In 1976 Bonnie went to Nashville to cut another album, called ``Honey on the Moon." It briefly hit the national charts, ``but a lot of those people were on drugs, and the company fell apart," she says.

``I came home."

She still derived a good income from royalties, and she kept busy racing thoroughbreds, sponsoring a championship Little League team and, in more recent years, playing host to musical shows at the Auburn Theater.

In the late 1970s she all but disappeared, even locally, after DePiano became ill. ``I had to make a choice," she recalls. ``You can't just dabble at music. You have to commit yourself. So I sort of retired to take care of my husband."

At night she would play and sing in front of a tape recorder, playing it back to remind herself she still had the touch.

DePiano died in January 1983. ``It was the worst," recalls daughter Paula, herself a singer who occasionally performs as Iris Hill. ``She doesn't do anything half way, and that includes grief. Even now, she has a hard time with it."

Then came a call from Marina Romary, the Greek-American restaurateur and mayor of Soap Lake. She was reopening the old Businessmen's Club, which had burned down in 1980, and she wanted name entertainment. Bonnie agreed.

After a week, Romary asked Bonnie to stay on. Three years later, she has become ``part of the family," Romary says. ``It's not just her singing. I can call her up at 4 a.m. and she'll come on over and clean prawns or whatever. . . ."

In this old resort town known for the healing qualities of its mineral water, Bonnie Guitar and Marina Romary forged a symbiotic relationship. While Bonnie helped re-establish the club, Romary provided her friend with an extended family.

Meanwhile, along came an offer from Larry Ray of Tumbleweed Records, a small, recently dormant recording company in Kirkland. Some months later, Bonnie and Marina were headed for a three-week recording session in Nashville.

The result is a two-record set, ``Yesterday" and ``Today," now getting sporadic promotions on local TV. The albums blend Bonnie Guitar's mature voice with a more contemporary set of studio musicians doing new renditions of some old songs _ and one particularly new one, ``My Last Hurrah."

``I realized that I've been out of it so long that I would need to be treated like a new artist," Bonnie says. ``When Larry called, I was excited about the idea. I told him, `Well, here it is, my last hurrah.' And then I sat down and wrote a song about it."

``. . . And if I seem to be lifting

off,

And flying a hundred feet

above the ground,

And can't come down,

Well this last hurrah is the best

hurrah

Just knowing I'll have another

time around."

Bonnie calls it a ballad. In fact, it has become something akin to a personal anthem, like Sinatra's ``My Way." The tune is simple, backed by complex chord progressions. She sings it with extraordinary feeling.

After dozens of singles and albums, Bonnie Guitar knows a thing or two about the record business. But she admits that this ``TV record," which Ray says is aimed at the ``over-55 market," is all new to her.

``The record hasn't exploded yet," she says. ``If it does, it would be nice to think about going on the road again.

``Another few weeks and spring will be here. That's when you really feel it. You feel the sun and you get that feeling and you forget about the motel rooms and the loneliness. . . ."

Another tour, maybe another hit song? She doesn't need them.

But they would be nice, and it is possible.

``I know my voice is deteriorating," she says. ``People say it's not so, but I know it is. I'm losing some of my elasticity and my range. That's just the way it is. Fortunately, I've been around long enough to know a few tricks and to keep it working."

And she can still play her guitar. Be it country, pop, rock or jazz, Bonnie Guitar remains a master of the flatpick and fretboard. She still owns a couple of dozen guitars, and plays them frequently.

``I've learned one thing the last few years," she says. ``I can't not play. I just can't. If I stop playing, even for a little while, I'll lose my touch."

Closing time. Marina has shoed the last members out the door and locked it. The bass player and the drummer have gone home and Bonnie has her coat on.

Wearily, Marina pours herself a stiff drink, slides onto a stool.

“Ah, c'mon, Bonnie. One more. For the bartender," she says.

Bonnie is not one to turn down an encore. Her face lights up as she slides back out of her coat, steps up to the stage, flips on the amplifier, drapes that heavy Les Paul around her neck. Eyes closed, she picks out a moody, melodic introduction, then croons her anthem.

“So here it is, my last hurrah.

It's plain to see it's sweeter,

more rewarding than the

rest.

If times get tough, I'll shout

aloud and through it all I'll

take it on the chin, and pass

the test.

My team is always on my side,

So I can't presume to say I did

it all.

And with God, the leader of the

band,

There`s no way I can fail this

last hurrah."

CUTLINE: THERE'S NO DOUBT THAT THE GUITAR HAS BEEN CENTRAL TO BONNIE GUITAR'S LIFE. SHE WEARS THIS CUSTOM-MADE VERSION ON HER HAND.

CUTLINE: A LONE COUPLE HIT THE DANCE FLOOR AT THE BUSINESSMAN'S CLUB IN SOAP LAKE WHERE BONNIE GUITAR AND HER BAND PLAY

• Caption: PHOTOIN SOAP LAKE'S NOTARAS LODGE, BONNIE STANDS BELOW A HORSE COLLAR THAT FRAMES A PICTURE OF HER AS A YOUNG PERFORMER. (SEE END OF TEXT FOR MORE CUTLINES)JIMI LOTT / SEATTLE TIMES: BONNIE GUITAR DOES A LITTLE PRACTICING AND JOKING WITH LONGTIME SOAP LAKE RESIDENT DOYLE `THE TROUBLEMAKER' RUSHTON. IN BACK IS A MURAL ON THE WALL OF DON'S RESTAURANT.IN THE LATE '50S, BONNIE ROSE TO FAME WITH HER HIT `DARK MOON.'THERE'S NO DOUBT THAT THE GUITAR HAS BEEN CENTRAL TO BONNIE GUITAR'S LIFE. SHE WEARS THIS CUSTOM-MADE VERSION ON HER HAND.A LONE COUPLE HIT THE DANCE FLOOR AT THE BUSINESSMAN'S CLUB IN SOAP LAKE WHERE BONNIE GUITAR AND HER BAND PLAY

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